

ON BEING A PROFESSOR: THE CHALLENGES OF TODAY AND TOMORROW

Aldemaro Romero Jr.
SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY EDWARDSVILLE

Abstract

This is an essay on facing rapid changes in academia drawn from thirty years of experience as a professor and administrator.

Introduction

As a professor, researcher and administrator in institutions of higher education (IHEs), I have built a career in academic settings that spans over three decades. The diversity of my work experiences range from a community college to a liberal arts college to research universities – including both public and private institutions in three different countries. My positions have included Graduate Assistantships, Instructor posts, serving as a Program Director, a Department Chair and now, a College Dean.

My comments are based on those experiences and not the result of any scholarly study. However, I think I can provide some insights about the life and career of a professor in an IHE, particularly about where we are heading and how the professoriate and administrators need to prepare in order to not only survive, but also thrive, in this rapidly changing world of academia.

The first thing that I need to state from the outset is that there is no way to stereotype a higher education professor. There is great diversity about what s/he does and how s/he does it. It may range from an adjunct position, in which the requirement is to teach several classes (sometimes at more than one institution, in the same term) to a full professor in a research university where s/he devotes most of his or her time to doing scholarly work with little teaching (if any – and often to a few graduate or postdoctoral students). Therefore, some of the things I am going to say may be applicable to some cases, but not to others.

Historical Background

Regardless of the modality, the fashion in which all educators in IHEs operate derives from a medieval Western European model that has changed (in some ways more drastically than others) through time. In those medieval times, the heads of the feudal states saw that their heirs needed to get some education to manage the affairs of their feudal domains. These leaders went to the few people who were able read and write at that time: the clergy. That is why, among other things, the academic regalia today is so similar to the wardrobe of that of a priest.

Because of that long tradition, and the fact that universities were set up as trade unions, today's IHEs look so different from other organizations in society. In fact, the name, "university," derives from the Latin *universitas magistrorum et scholarium* – a guild of teachers and students. Because of that, such universities developed a sense of independence and insulation early on.

The notion of "academic freedom," as first developed in medieval times, has undergone a metamorphosis. Initially, academic freedom referred to a scholar's guaranteed right to travel freely from one place to another – in the interest of education. Later, it became the freedom to teach anything in the manner. Yet, in modern times this concept has taken on a more labor-inclined meaning regarding tenure. Many believe that academic freedom provides protection against termination for professional activities. There are, however, many more restrictions surrounding this sentiment than most people think.¹ I

¹ For a good summary on the origin of universities as institutions, see pp. 206-213 in David C. Lindberg's (1992) *The Beginnings of Western Science*.

mention the issues of insularity and academic freedom because we need to understand them to better appreciate the psyche of today's professoriate.

Today's Challenges

Obviously things have changed a lot since medieval times. Part of those changes have to do with the diversified system of models followed today: from traditional colleges and universities to accredited distance-learning institutions, from big to small, from private to public, from totally independent to ideologically-controlled institutions where actual indoctrination takes place.

Despite such diversity and transformations, I am afraid that the changes to come are going to be more radical and fast pace than anyone can imagine. Some of these changes are the product of financial realities – with government putting less and less money into public institutions. Others are the drive of IHEs to more competitively recruit students. The costs of running the institution rises, as more and more is spent to develop infrastructure, amenities, and activities (mostly sports) that have little to do with formal academic education. This cost is invariably passed on to the students (and their families). At the end of the day, these changes make quality education less accessible and affordable. Those who do attempt to attain education from these IHEs carry heavy loan burdens for a long time – particularly if they go to professional schools, such as law and medicine. As a result of this, two other negative consequences have come along. First is the questioning by many of the value of higher education. This plays right into the hands of those who push an anti-intellectualism agenda. Second is an increasing intrusion by state and federal governments into the daily affairs of IHEs which, with the exception of private institutions, are governed by trustees who occupy these positions not because of their academic backgrounds or educational ties to those institutions, but because of their political connections.

Another set of factors shaping the future of IHEs is the demonization of higher education for political purposes – as is the case of the repeated allegations that IHEs serve as brainwashing operations, propelled by a liberal political agenda. This has reinforced the urge for more intrusion by state governments and political pundits on curricular issues and the form in which classes are delivered. One of those pushes has been to decry that education in the liberal arts is “useless” – despite evidence of the contrary. Combined with this is the push to turn attention (and resources) to the maintenance and development of professional schools.

Another set of factors that cannot be overlooked is technology. In the last few years we have seen a lot of enthusiasm for new modalities of instructional delivery, such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), as a way to offer cheap (if not totally free) education to large groups of people. Although the effectiveness of such approaches has yet to be proven, to me, what this denotes is part of the American psyche of finding “technological fixes” to whatever problem we encounter – such as the rising cost of higher education and the populist idea that everybody with a high school diploma is ready for a higher education degree. Regardless of that, there is no question that on-line education has become more pervasive and that it is upsetting the conventional wisdom of how higher education has been operating for centuries.

One potential positive outcome from the expansion of on-line courses is that it challenges the notion of instructors as talking textbooks in the classroom. Hopefully this will induce new classroom approaches that are more creative, engaged, and productive.²

How to Survive and Even Rise Above These Challenges

How will higher education look ten, twenty or thirty years from now? Nobody really knows. Things are changing so fast in an information technology-driven world that most predictions being made today will probably be wrong. One thing we can say with certainty is that IHEs will continue to change and that is the major challenge to both the professoriate and administrators.

In addition to the human instinct to fear change, academia is particularly resistant to it. Despite the “liberal” label applied to the professoriate by the media and in some political quarters, the fact of the

² See, for example, J.A. Bowen's (2012) *Teaching naked: How moving technology out of your classroom will improve student learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

matter is that professors are very conservative when it comes to their own profession. That comes from their tradition of insularity and protection of their academic privileges (e.g., academic freedom, freedom regarding how they allocate their time, and the tenure system).

To make things worse, the calendar and dynamics on which IHEs operate make them not only resistant to change, but even when it happens, it seems to take almost forever to occur. The result is that when changes are implemented, they seem to be out of phase with the realities they were supposed to address. Given that cultural, political and financial changes are occurring and are beyond the control of IHEs, we need to confront reality as it is, not as we wish it should be. As the American author, Maya Angelou, said, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."

Therefore, I believe that both faculty and administrators need to change their attitudes towards the world. We all know that change is always painful, uncertain, and filled with unpredictable consequences but, nonetheless, unavoidable. And it would be irresponsible for all of us not to understand that we need to be prepared for the tectonic shifts that are approaching. We cannot mortgage the future by focusing just on the current problems.

We need to deal with the world as it is, and today's world is one in which information technology, economics, and politics is changing how we deliver higher education, who has access to it, and which stakeholders believe they should have a say in its future. It is a world that can no longer hold ivory towers. We need to be proactive, recognizing that a larger portion of the professoriate will have to spend more time and effort in thinking about how we want the future to look for IHEs. That means we must be more engaged in and informed of the day-to-day affairs of our respective institutions.

Administrators also need to be more proactive when it comes to shaping the future of their institutions. It is well known that, although almost all of those who teach in IHEs come from academia themselves, academia has not been doing a very good job in teaching future professors how to teach. Rather, institutions effectively socialize students to become specialists in, what is for the general public, obscure subjects. If academia has not been doing a good job in teaching IHEs professors to be good teachers, it is doing an even worse job in teaching them to become academic leaders. No wonder more and more boards of trustees look for people outside academia to lead IHEs. I believe that the single most important step administrators should take to address current and emerging challenges is to develop leadership academies within their institutions. We need to start formal training for our faculty, so they can become effective and creative managers of the future. This will also help to create the next set of administrators by de-mystifying the process. No other challenge is more urgent to confront, nor more difficult to achieve, because of a simple reason: it requires changes in the mindset of both faculty (who need to participate) and administrators (who need to implement those changes).

Make no mistake about it: this will be a risky endeavor, but we shouldn't be afraid of failing. In academia, we learn far more from challenges than we learn from unencumbered success. It is clear to me that we need to do something and we need to do it fast.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to John M. Pratte for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

REFERENCES

- Bowen, J.A. (2012). *Teaching naked: How moving technology out of your classroom will improve student learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lindberg, D.C. (1992). *The beginnings of western science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.